

Workforce Development Critical in Southwest Oklahoma

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Availability of a skilled workforce ranks top on a list of priorities for improving the regional economy, according to a survey directed toward convention, retail, tourism and service businesses in a 20-county southwest region of Oklahoma.

The Southwestern Oklahoma State University Center for Economic and Business Development in Weatherford has been conducting the on-going survey for the Southwest Oklahoma Impact Coalition to determine priority topics and action plans to improve economic development potential and growth for southwest Oklahoma.

Don Nigus, program liaison and research coordinator at the SWOSU CEBD, said other priorities include access to leading technology and communications as well as transportation, primarily roads and highways. Quality of life issues include available quality health care, child care for working families, availability of affordable housing, and quality and quantity of water resources.

Employers, according to Nigus, seek individuals with the ability to achieve higher skill levels to enable their businesses to compete in a constantly changing, expanding market. Soft skills (punctuality, responsibility, reliability, attitudes and behaviors displayed in interaction among individuals) were often identified as deficiencies in skills and attributes of new hires currently being interviewed.

Since March of 2006, approximately 50% of the potential business sector interviews have been completed. The Convention, Retail, Tourism and Service (CRTS) sector is the most recent survey component of the e-Synchronist data collection system designed to support business and industry growth and retention. Compilation of the data is part of a project sponsored by the Oklahoma Department of Commerce and the United States Economic Development Authority, located at SWOSU.

Staff members from Cameron University, Western Oklahoma State College, University of Science and Arts of Oklahoma, and SWOSU are currently contacting regional businesses to establish interview appointments. Interviews completed to date are composed of 68% service businesses, 27% retail, 3% tourism, and 2% convention and entertainment businesses.

Nigus said community emergency services and education services were rated most positive across the region by interview participants with averages of 5.77 and 5.73, respectively, on a rating scale with a high of seven. The average rating of 6.01 for fire protection was the highest given in any community services area. Community emergency services also received high praise in a majority of the communities. Availability of affordable housing at a rating of 4.25 may have some bearing on the 3.49 rating of the availability of the workforce.

"These numbers may change significantly following the completion of the total survey," Nigus said. "However, indicators in major areas currently parallel those collected from industry employers in the area."

The SOIC will host its second annual conference for business and industry on January 12, 2007, at the Quartz Mountain Conference Center. The complete results of the CRTS survey will be presented along with developing stakeholder action plans designed to address identified priority issues. Information concerning the complete conference agenda will be announced in the near future.

Front line team members will continue to contact regional businesses for interview appointments. Data collection completion is expected within the next 60-90 days. Initial letters followed by phone calls to establish appointment times continue to be the process used by front line team members for identifying interview participants.

For additional information, contact the CEBD at 580.774.7095.